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SUBJECT: ZHENGZHOU WELCOMES EMBASSY'S FIRST VIRTUAL PRESENCE POST IN CHINA

SUMMARY

**¶11.** (SBU) The China Mission launched its first Virtual Presence Post (VPP) in Henan Province's Zhengzhou city during a major commercial Expo in the city. Despite local officials' initial uncertainty, the media and residents of Zhengzhou welcomed the new initiative, which built on more than a year of increased exchanges with the city and Province. The VPP website received overwhelmingly positive coverage in print, television, radio, and Internet media. The Embassy's newly formed "Team Zhengzhou," consisting of 15 representatives from several sections and agencies, will need to continue to work creatively to build confidence with those local government officials and institutions still unsure of how to react to this new initiative. End Summary.

EXPANDING OUTREACH IN ZHENGZHOU

**¶12.** (SBU) Located on the banks of the Yellow River in Central China, Zhengzhou boasts a population of more than three million residents. Though dwarfed by some of China's mega cities (Wuhan, for example, soon to be the site of the first APP in China, is nearly three times larger), Zhengzhou is a major provincial capital. Henan province has nearly 100 million people, ranks fifth in GDP among China's provinces and municipalities, and has enjoyed 14-plus percent economic growth in each of the past three years. In 2006, the Ambassador identified Zhengzhou as one of the Embassy's top ten outreach targets, and Embassy officers from ECON, PAS, FCS, ESTH, and other sections traveled there frequently during the year. Economic Officers paid four visits to Zhengzhou in 2006. The Deputy Chief of the Economic Section traveled to the city in July, and the Econoff with the provincial economy portfolio visited in January, April, and November. This officer's established expertise led to the DCM naming him (with strong support from the Econ Section) as the Virtual Principal Officer (VPO).

**¶13.** (SBU) The pro-engagement attitudes of municipal and provincial officials also had an impact on our decision to make Zhengzhou the place to begin our VPP effort. Outreach in China can be difficult because most meetings or outreach must first be approved by the Provincial Foreign Affairs Office (FAO). This has been less of a problem in Henan, where we enjoy generally cordial relations with provincial officials and benefit from a helpful FAO Americas Desk Director.

PAVING THE WAY FOR THE VPP

**¶14.** (SBU) In March, Embassy formed "Team Zhengzhou," 15 representatives from several sections and agencies. To conserve resources, Team Zhengzhou's core team of the Econoff VPP Principal Officer, Transformational Diplomacy Officer and PAS staff decided to launch the site initially as a Chinese-only site, "Meiguo Jiaoliu

Zai Xian Zhongguo Zhengzhou" or "American Exchange On-Line, Zhengzhou, China." Because State.gov sites are often blocked or filtered in China, the site follows the common practice for Embassy and Consulate websites in China of having a mirror site provided by a local Internet Service Provider as well. (The URLs are <http://zhengzhou.usvpp.gov> and <http://zhengzhou.usembassy-china.org.cn>.) Having the second website allows easier access to the site by residents in Zhengzhou.

¶ 15. (SBU) Embassy officers then began populating the site with content, including a welcome letter from the Ambassador on the front page (which was warmly received in Zhengzhou and remains on the front page), links to business and visa information and a regular blog (in Chinese) by the VPO. This blog, "Mo Lei Zai Naar" (Where is Murray?) offers Zhengzhou netizens an informal opportunity to get to know an Embassy official through regular postings about visits to Henan Province and Henan-related news. Our goal is to post weekly entries about exchanges between the United States and Henan Province. Although the site is for the moment Chinese-only, also includes an "English Salon" aimed at students.

#### A SUCCESSFUL LAUNCH

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¶ 16. (SBU) Although it would be difficult for local officials to block the site altogether, we were concerned that they could make it very difficult to operate if they so chose. In early April, the VPO informed the Henan Provincial FAO about our intention to "go live" to coincide with Zhengzhou's hosting of the Central China Expo, a major economic and commercial event. Perhaps aware that opposing the site would run counter to the Expo's goal of trumpeting the degree to which Henan is open to the outside world, the FAO offered no complaints. The site went live during the last week of April, unblocked and unfiltered.

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¶ 17. (SBU) The success of the media outreach was far from certain at the outset. The FAO initially denied Emboffs permission to contact media organizations directly, insisting that it would do so. Consumed with Expo-related work, though, they did nothing. With no go-ahead from the FAO and unsure how to respond to the VPP initiative, Henan People's Radio took the "safe" path, declining our request for an on-air interview and forcing a partner radio station to cancel one already scheduled. Finally, after determined effort by our press officers, the FAO relented, giving us the green light to make our own media arrangements.

¶ 18. (SBU) With the FAO out of the way, the local media were happy to discuss and promote the website. The VPO, Press Officer, and Consular Officer gave several interviews on April 25. The Chinese language "Jin Ri An Bao" newspaper gave a glowing endorsement of the website in an April 26 article entitled "American Exchange On-Line, Especially for Henan," later picked up by Internet media. Henan People's Radio's popular Tourism Show interviewed the VPO on April 26, and Emboffs also gave interviews to Henan TV, Henan People's Radio, and "Da He" News to spread the word about the website. Indeed, "Da He" was so taken with the site that they arranged a one-hour web chat with the VPO on Da He's Internet provider. The Chinese participants were particularly appreciative that the VPO gave all his interviews, and typed his web chat responses, in Chinese. Several other Henan online media organizations and a nationwide web portal picked up the Da He web chat, reprinting the information on their own websites and portals. The web chat was reedited and republished by <http://forum.china.com.cn>, <http://news.shangdu.com>, and <http://news.sohu.com>.) Team Zhengzhou will continue to work creatively to build confidence with those local government officials and institutions still unsure how to react to the new initiative, as was demonstrated by the early media outreach hiccups.

#### FUTURE PLANS

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¶ 19. (SBU) VPP Zhengzhou will focus primarily on outreach to students, businessmen and cultural and educational organizations in Henan

Province. As in other areas of China, visa outreach is especially welcome in Henan, and a Consular Officer who took part in the kickoff met with students at SIAS[DoS1] University in Zhengzhou on April 27. The business community in Zhengzhou is interested in increasing links with American businessmen, and FCS, along with the American Chamber of Commerce and United States-China Business Council (USCBC), will work together to provide more information relevant to Zhengzhou.

¶10. (SBU) We expect that cultural issues may be the area of greatest interest in Henan. The province is home to many cultural and historic sites, including the Shaolin Temple and Longmen Grottoes, and Henan residents are justifiably proud of their history. The VPP Website, therefore, will explore opportunities for cultural exchange such as teaching English or links to Henan Province's Sister State of Kansas and Zhengzhou's Sister City of Richmond, Virginia.

¶11. (SBU) The Mo Lei Zai Naar Blog also will focus on culture, especially highlighting Americans' interest in Henan's culture and history. Emboffs' knowledge of Henan's culture became the focus and primary interest of several of the media interviews as well as the April 26. By saying that we are still learning about Henan's culture while also naming the cultural and historic places of interest that we recognize, Emboffs will make significant progress towards improving mutual understanding between the United States and Zhengzhou and Henan Province.

ON THE RIGHT TRACK

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¶12. (SBU) Maintaining sufficient contact with Zhengzhou both in-person and on-line and also keeping fresh content on the VPP website will be challenges for Team Zhengzhou. We are on the right track to promoting a more positive image of the United States with the people of China's most populous province. We fully expect to have problems with risk-averse local officials as we use new means to reach out to students, businesspeople, and ordinary citizens, but are confident that this kind of expanded exchange will benefit Zhengzhou and Henan Province as well as the United States. Embassy is grateful to IIP and E-Diplomacy for their support of this project.

¶13. (SBU) One of Team Zhengzhou's key tasks is to assess the resource implications of a broader VPP effort. VPP Zhengzhou was opened without any new resources but, with more than 150 cities in China with more than one million residents, this model is not sustainable for an expanded program. While our program is designed to take advantage of economies of scale, mounting the kind of effort

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needed to do justice to the Secretary's transformational diplomacy vision in China will require significant new resources, in the form of personnel, computer software, hardware, and training, and public diplomacy programming. We have identified some of these requirements in our latest Rightsizing report and MSP submission, and will continue to refine these projections as we better understand the challenges we face.

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